



Natomas Oral Histories

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Oral interview of

Russell Fong

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This is not a verbatim transcript. Parts of the interview have been paraphrased.

Kathleen: Would you like to talk about yourself a little bit first? Your early life, where you were born?

[00:00:36]

Russell: I was born here in the United States. When I was about 8 years old, the family went back to China. Or I should say my father sent the family back to China and he stayed here. So, I spent about five years in China in the village. I came back when I was 13 years old. That gave me quite a good background in the Chinese history, attitude, customs, and so forth. For some reason, I remember that very vividly, that experience. I came back in 1937 right before the war with Japan. I attended school here, grade school, from '37 to '41. I attended grammar school and junior high, Lincoln Junior High. The war came along and I got a couple of years of deferment by working at the Fong Ranch, because they didn't have any worker and the government permitted someone who was working a farm a deferment. We had to keep the farm going. The government needed the produce because of the war. I went into the service after that, discharged in the latter part of 1946. Then I went, after only five years of grammar school education — I went directly into junior college after passing the qualifying exam. I had to make up all the credits I had missed, though.

Kathleen: Really.

Russell: Yes, I had one and a half years of high school. I graduated junior college in two years and then went to state college and finished that in two and a half years in mathematics and physics in 1952. Then I got married. Went to work for the State of California for about three years and then went to Aerojet as a mathematician eventually in one of the computing departments. This was when computers were just being born.

Kathleen: Ok.

[00:03:54]

Russell: In 1955, that was. I worked there for about eight or nine years, then went out on a consulting business, stayed there for about four years. Aerojet wanted me back, so I went back there and left a year later because they would not reinstate my retirement. I said, "I cannot stay here; I need retirement." I then went back to the state and finished up my career at the State of California.

Kathleen: What did you do at the state?

Russell: I went in there as a systems analyst and eventually became a manager of the computer department in General Services. Then, when they consolidated the computer centers, I went over to the Department of Education and stayed there for about 15 years. I ended up managing the school lunch and day care operation. All the time, too, when I was in General Services and Department of Education, I taught at the state university in the evening, in the Department of Business Administration. I taught the quantitative topics like statistics, computers, calculus, and taught mainly business administration students.

Kathleen: You mean at Sac State, right?

Russell: Yes, at Sac State. I retired about six years ago.

Kathleen: Are you enjoying your retirement?

Russell: Oh yes. I do some golf and things like that.

Kathleen: Do you travel?

Russell: We travel a little bit. We are not big travelers. We've been to the Caribbean, to China, to Canada, we just came back from a trip to Central Europe, and to Hawaii a couple of times.

Kathleen: Yes. That is a lot. You never lived in Natomas did you?

Russell: No, I never lived in Natomas. I got involved in the managership of the property some 15 years ago, maybe a little longer now because my dad had a share in the ownership. The managership had passed through a couple of hands already. One of the minority owners had a chance to manage it, so I got into it in that respect. I did work on the farm when I first came back from China in 1936 — or was it 1937 and '38 — to pick tomatoes until I went into the service. I worked on that farm on and off since that time until, of course, I went in the service. Natomas, at the time I was here — that was in the mid-'30s to '40s — was nothing but farmland. They were fairly big operations. The farmers had about two- or three-hundred acres. Our farm was about 360 acres at that time. We grew tomatoes, sugar beets, alfalfa, grains, mainly for canneries, for canning purposes. A winter crop we grew was celery. We actually packed the celery to ship it back East ourselves.

Kathleen: Oh.

[00:08:28]

Russell: During the war, there were no soybeans coming out of China. So, we experimented growing soybeans to see whether the crop would cultivate here in Central California. It turned out that it did quite well, so we got into that during the war and I think it was very profitable.

Kathleen: I can understand that. I would think anything you could produce during the war would have brought a bigger price.

Russell: Yes, it was a high-demand era. Soybeans provide the bean stock for chow mein and other foods.

Kathleen: Right. So, you have information on your father and his father before him?

Russell: Yes.

Kathleen: How many generations came before you?

Russell: Ok. The background — let me give you a little bit of the background of my family, because it gives a better understanding of the cultural aspects of Chinese. My grandfather was here in the United States in the mid-1800s. I assume he worked on the railroad and so forth. He then went back to China and he wanted to start to cultivate peanuts to make peanut oil for cooking and sugar cane to produce sugar. Apparently, he was not completely successful. When I went back to China in '32-'33, I witnessed the growing of the peanuts and sugar cane, but there was no production of sugar and oil.

Kathleen: I see.

[00:10:33]

Russell: There was when I learned that his two sons had been given a good education. The oldest son was my grandfather. He chose to stay in the old country and became a respected village elder, so to speak. The second son, who is the son instrumental here in purchasing the Fong Ranch, was a very well-educated person. He went through the imperial examination process to attain a certain intellectual level. He was well-respected from that perspective. He immigrated here to the United States and became a very successful merchant. The story begins here. After my grand-uncle comes here at a very young age, he was very concerned with family values in China and all that and education and so forth. He came here and after being fairly successful, he decided he wants to sponsor a member of each family branch to come to the United States, and so consequently he did that. Those close relatives like my dad and my uncle, which were not his nephews, he brought them both over.

Kathleen: Oh, ok.

Russell: After they came here in those days — this was probably like in the mid-1920s; you can collaborate with Roger about that — this grand-uncle decided then to take advantage of the expiration co-plan the government offered. This plan stated that if you cleared the land, you could farm it for five years rent-free. This inspiration, I think, comes from the exposure to his father, my grandfather. They did that. After the five years were up, they wanted to expand the operation, and purchased what is known to us now as Fong Ranch. The initial venture was truck farming for Chinese vegetables for the Chinese grocery stores. Fong Ranch became a pretty big-time operation, supplying the canneries, processing, for shipping back East and so forth. The initial venture I think was somewhere in Yolo County. Of course, the Fong Ranch is in Sacramento County. The important factor here I think was that my grand-uncle, he did business under the name of Fong-Sit. When the immigrants came over they did not have the language, do not have the facility for support system. If you don't work, you go hungry.

Kathleen: Exactly.

[00:14:30]

Russell: So, they had a need to work the land, so to speak. It was through his initiative that this came about. He being a very intelligent person, I guess things came naturally to him in terms of investment, in terms of looking to the future and so forth. Fortunately, many, many persons benefited by his actions. We are thinking about having some kind of commemoration for him at the new high school being built. We haven't decided what we will do yet. We thought also of naming one of the streets Fong Ranch Boulevard or Fong Ranch. The time that I remember working there in the late '30s, early '40s, the closest humanity, other than this camp on this farm, was the SP station. I remember walking downtown, working all day, and then — we stayed down on the ranch when we worked there in the summers, so on weekends, we would walk to Sacramento to the SP station. So, it was not desolate, but no activity out there other than farming. Beyond that point, the growth of Natomas — we had the farm all this time — after about mid-1970s, we leased the land to someone to work on it. We did not work on it anymore. It was kind of difficult after the area was incorporated into the city because it was the city regulations of pesticides, water flooding, and so forth.

Kathleen: Oh. *[Laughter]*

Russell: It was so difficult to keep the operation profitable. By that time, we were already into the so-called second generation and we had gone to the service, we had come back, we had education now. My father was the first generation. I'm the second generation. When my brother and sister and myself came out, we had a college education and went on and did not want to do the farm. We leased it out, sharecropped it with other operators. The income wasn't enough to even pay the property tax and bonds. When Natomas started developing, all the property owners had to pay for the bonds, the infrastructures.

Kathleen: Oh.

[00:18:18]

Russell: Whether it was profitable or not, they didn't care. They allocate the bonding to each property owner. We would be paying bonds and taxes and so on, and the income from the sharecrop operations did not pay for that. All the descendent owners from the beginning — there were about a dozen and I knew all of them. Today there is over 60, and we had been paying for the taxes and bonds since the early '70s.

Kathleen: *[Unintelligible question]*

Russell: Oh, yes, still there. I think it would never cease that more taxes and more bonds would be added on.

Kathleen: For sidewalks and the whole thing.

Russell: Yes. As far as Natomas, as vividly as I can remember, the legacy, I like to call it, of Fong Ranch, because of the relationship of my grand-uncle with his educational background, with his entrepreneurial experience, with his family ties, and so on. I summarize it as representing his personal vision of wanting to take care of the family, that part of his teaching of the fostering of the family values in Chinese tradition, about the value of education, about the dream of coming to the Gold Mountain.

Kathleen: What?

Russell: In China, we call coming to the United States coming to the Gold Mountain, meaning the land of opportunity.

Kathleen: Right.

Russell: The immigrants that he brought over all had the same dream. Come over here, gather the gold — earn some money — and go back to the homeland.

Kathleen: Right.

[00:20:48]

Russell: Of all the persons involved in the initial purchase of Fong Ranch, none ever realized that dream of going back to China. I don't know how much money they made, but none realized the dream of going back to China. By that time, they would see that it was not Gold Mountain — you would have to work, and I guess not too many amassed a fortune. My grand-uncle did, but not too many other people did. Instead of going back, they brought the family over.

Kathleen: Right.

Russell: So today, in the Fong Ranch Company, we are down to about third- and fourth-generation ownership now.

Kathleen: So, the ownership is divided up.

Russell: Yes, it is divided up as you go down the family tree. The grand-uncle was quite a person. He not only brought the relatives and the family over, he also initiated a cultural school here. It used to be located on 5th and N Street. It was a form of support for the immigrants that he brought over.

Kathleen: Right.

Russell: He wanted to perpetuate the Chinese heritage and cultural-type programs. He also started the Chinese Community Church here in 1924. Today the church is located here on Gilgunn Way. You may have heard of us. We sponsor a festival every year.

Kathleen: No, I haven't, but I'll look for it. Is it a Christian church?

Russell: A Christian church. We are a part of the Reformed Church in America.

Kathleen: How did the Chinese become Christian?

Russell: Exposure.

Kathleen: Oh.

[00:23:16]

Russell: When he came over, I'm pretty sure he did not have any Christian background. It happened about in 1920 when there was no government program support system in town to help the immigrants like there is today.

Kathleen: Oh, right.

Russell: So, naturally the immigrant came to the churches for help. The Chinese of Sacramento, at least the ones I'm affiliated with, started associating with a Methodist church. The people my grand-uncle sponsored, when he pulled out, he decided to establish a Chinese School in order to support itself. He hired a teacher for the school and she happened to be a Christian. I think that was the introductions of Christianity into the church that then developed.

Kathleen: Oh. What was the traditional religion in China?

Russell: The traditional religion in China was basically Buddhism.

Kathleen: There is more than one religion in China, right? I don't know lot about China.

Russell: Well, they say Confucianism is a religion, but it's not; it's a philosophy.

Kathleen: Yes, right.

Russell: There is Taoism and so forth in China, but I know nothing about them. The brief time I was there, I associated basically with Buddhism.

Kathleen: Oh. Ok. What do you think the biggest change in the Natomas area is over all this time?

Russell: The biggest change of course is the development. It would have been a lot quicker if the city council in the '80s did not interfere. There was a time when we put our land on the market, some time ago, but there were all kinds of lawsuits for a while. The city council was not giving approval for development plan. It was going on for a long time.

Kathleen: It is still going on, isn't it?

Russell: It is still going on. I think there is some semblance of orderliness. They are building the overpass. The overpass is on our property.

Kathleen: Yes.

Russell: Over 20 years ago, the city bought land from us for the I-80 overpass.

[00:26:33]

Kathleen: Is the land for Arco Arena part of the Fong Ranch?

Russell: No. The land where Arco Arena stands is northwest of the Fong Ranch. The boulevard that leads into Arco Arena, Truxel Road, is on part of our property. The highway I-80 split our property into two pieces, north and south.

Kathleen: Yes. I was looking this up in the *Bee* and I found out this information. I've lived in Sacramento for a while, but I'm not real familiar with this area. People would say "Natomas," and I'd know it was over that way somewhere. It has changed a lot and I've only been here since '82.

Russell: Yes. '82?

Kathleen: Right.

Russell: You were right in the middle of the changes.

Kathleen: Yes.

Russell: By the time I came back to be involved into this, I was shocked with all the development that had gone on. I had not seen the development. It just hit me in the face.

Kathleen: I've had that — gone somewhere where I'd gone a long time ago. You can't find your way around.

Russell: Yes.

[00:27:54]

Kathleen: Do you want to talk a little about the land that was donated to the school?

Russell: Ok. The school wanted originally about 50 acres from us. They chose the acreage basically, like, on the front door, naturally, to give them access. I understand that. There were no problems with that. We negotiated for the sale of that land. Then they later on expanded the acreage to 60 acres. The expansion for the school went far enough to cut off all the access to the remaining land that was ours on the south side of I-80. The remaining 37 acres was landlocked. The fire marshal said, "You're now going to need to bring in a large water main, and every other structure required, sprinkler system, etcetera." This would be a very expensive piece of property to develop. Secondly, we had no access. Who would want to be in there? We negotiated for the price of the purchase and said, "We'll donate that land to the school district, that 37 acres that were landlocked." We said, we want a certain price; they said, too high. We said, or we'll go to the court and sue for damage because we basically lost the use of 37 acres.

Kathleen: Yes, right.

Russell: So, the negotiations proceeded. It was a gift that was meaningful to us in a sense because of our value for education and feeling that the family can be thankful for the blessing of the grace of God, too. We organized a church. It was a combination of things. We felt that the school district would be able to make better use of that extra landlocked piece of land than we could.

Kathleen: Do you know what they are going to do with it?

Russell: I don't know what they plan to do with it.

Kathleen: It is quite a bit of land.

Russell: Yes. The school district was quite willing to work with us.

Kathleen: It turned out good for everybody.

Russell: Yes. It was a win-win situation.

Kathleen: When will this be finished?

Russell: Next year.

[00:32:56]

Kathleen: How many acres do you have left?

Russell: We have about 30 acres left on the south of the freeway and another 115 acres north of the freeway. Quite a bit left yet.

Kathleen: Yes. Are you involved with anything else in the community?

Russell: I'm pretty involved in our church, the Chinese Community Church. After my retirement, I spent quite a bit of time there. I'm also an elder, the vice president of the board.

Kathleen: Oh, I see. You are?

Russell: They call it the consistory, but it really is the board of directors of the church.

Kathleen: Do you have a lot of members?

Russell: Our membership is really not that great. We have, oh, about 50 to 60 so-called communicant members. We do have a lot of worshipping members, a pretty large congregation in that respect. We get about 80 each Sunday for worship. It is a very unusual church with the worshipping congregation larger than the official membership roll.

Kathleen: Yes. Are there persons other than Chinese there?

Russell: Yes. We call it the Chinese Community Church, but we do have intermarriage couples come.

Kathleen: Oh.

Russell: A Japanese couple, a Caucasian couple, an intermarriage Caucasian couple.

Kathleen: Is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to add?

Russell: I can't think of anything as far as Natomas is concerned.

Kathleen: Or, just anything.

Russell: Maybe I can give you a copy of what I brought here and you can take whatever you would like out of it.